

AUDIO

FAQ

Q Can I use a set of multi-channel computer speakers to get surround sound from my DVD player?

A Most modern DVDs are created with a multiple-channel digital soundtrack, encoded using the Dolby Digital or DTS standards. You can't hear this soundtrack without first converting it back from a digital single into analogue sound. In most home cinema setups, this conversion is performed by a compatible amplifier.

Multi-channel computer speakers usually have multiple analogue inputs, and will only accept a signal that has already been decoded. Most DVD players have analogue stereo outputs only, and so will limit you to stereo sound.

If you want multi-channel sound, you'll need to find a DVD player with its own decoder and analogue outputs for each channel, or a high-end set of speakers with a built-in decoder. Alternatively, buy a separate decoder such as Creative's DDTS-100, which will take the optical or coaxial digital audio signal from your DVD player and convert it to a multi-channel analogue signal for your speakers.

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EVESHAM M-box 160GB

★★★

£599 inc VAT

Evesham has turned the 500GB Thecus YES Box N2100 (reviewed in our network storage Labs, *Shopper* June 2006) into the basis of its M-box network media server. Evesham's version costs quite a lot more and it has less storage, but it also has wireless networking and includes an M-bridge music player.

The M-box is designed as a home music server. It can stream MP3, AAC and WAV audio files to the M-bridge music player. The M-bridge is actually a Roku Soundbridge, the winner of a Best Buy award in *Labs*, December 2005. It's easy to use and sounds great.

Unfortunately, setting up the M-box is a pain. By default, it's configured to create a wireless network and to connect to a wired network using a static IP address. If you have an existing wireless network, Evesham recommends that you disable the M-box's own wireless network and wire it to your router with an Ethernet cable.

This makes sense, but if your network uses DHCP you can't just connect the M-box and carry on. Instead, you'll need to reconfigure your PC's network settings manually, connect the M-box using a

crossover cable, log in and change the M-box's network settings before you can go any further. As most home users use DHCP we can't imagine why it isn't enabled as standard. Evesham supplies a paper manual to assist with this process, but at several points we were told to "turn to page ????" to continue.

After a lengthy configuration process, we managed to convince the M-box to connect to our router, where it worked fairly well. Evesham



has installed two 160GB disks, but these are configured in RAID 1, giving just 160GB of mirrored storage. This makes sense, as it protects your music collection from a drive failure and means you don't have to worry about backups. If you don't care about this, you can change the settings to provide 320GB of space instead.

The M-box streams audio files placed into its iTunes directory. Annoyingly, though, it doesn't use the common uPNP audio standard for network music players. This means that it works fine with the supplied M-bridge and other Roku Soundbridge players, but it

can't connect to cheaper players such as the Philips SLA5520 (opposite). You can also stream music to your PC using iTunes, but you'll need to find an older version, such as iTunes 5, for this to work.

The M-box is disappointing. It's a decent idea, but it should be far easier to set up and would be a better buy with uPNP support, so that you can use it with a wider range of network media players.

Tom Royal

SUMMARY

- ✓ M-bridge player is excellent
- ✗ Complicated setup; poor manual
- ✗ Doesn't support uPNP players

NETWORK MUSIC SERVER Streams AAC, MP3, WAV music, 2x Gigabit Ethernet and 802.11G wireless networking, iTunes music server, 2x 160GB hard disks, includes Roku Soundbridge network audio player
PART CODE M-BOX160GB
SUPPLIER www.lowestonweb.com
DETAILS www.evesham.com

Also consider...

SENNHEISER PXC 250

★★★★★

£70 inc VAT



These headphones use active electronics to cancel out environmental sounds. They don't do much to reduce unwelcome speech or music, but they are astonishingly effective on a plane or train. They sound great, with plenty of bass, and are comfortable to wear. Aside from their bulky battery case, these headphones are ideal for travel.



HEADPHONES Stereo-active noise-cancelling headphones, frequency response 10-21,000Hz, sensitivity 106dB
PART CODE PXC 250
SUPPLIER www.dolphinmusic.co.uk
DETAILS www.sennheiser.co.uk

✓ Reduce background noise ✗ Bulky battery case **FULL REVIEW** Dec 2005

LOGITECH X-230

★★★★★

£24 inc VAT



Logitech's X-230 were the most affordable 2.1 channel speakers in our recent Labs test, but they sounded better than much more expensive competitors. Each satellite's drivers are visible through a cloth net covering, while the compact subwoofer is protected by a sturdy metal grille.

These speakers could do with a second audio input, longer cables and an easy to reach bass level control, but they're outstanding for this price. Though not amazingly loud, they look superb and produce detailed and balanced sound.

2.1 SPEAKERS line input, 32W RMS power
PART CODE 970123-0120

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk **DETAILS** www.logitech.co.uk ✓ Excellent sound ✗ Only one input **FULL REVIEW** Apr 2006

CREATIVE GigaWorks G500

★★★★★

£148 inc VAT



Creative's high-end set of 5.1 speakers give prominence to bass and treble frequencies that make for heart-pounding action in games. Each satellite speaker is rated at 36W, while the dual-ported subwoofer is capable of delivering 130W of crisp bass.

They produce wonderfully balanced and detailed music, and are worth the high price.

5.1 SPEAKERS Three line inputs plus aux input, 310W RMS power

PART CODE 51MF4040AA001

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk **DETAILS** http://uk.europe.creative.com ✓ Produce clearly defined sound ✗ Auxiliary input is on the sub **FULL REVIEW** Apr 2006

PHILIPS SLA5520

★★★★★

£87 inc VAT



Philips' SLA5520 takes music from your PC and plays it on your hi-fi system. It connects to 802.11b or 802.11g wireless networks, and can use WEP or WPA encryption. Its music server program runs on your PC. This works well enough, but as the SLA5520 is compatible with uPNP, you can use Microsoft's free Windows Media Connect server instead.



The SLA5520's screen shows light blue text on a dark blue background, which makes it difficult to read track information from a distance.

The SLA5520 lacks the features that appear in more expensive products such as Roku's Soundbridge. If you want a cheap and simple way to play your music wirelessly, though, it's a great buy.

Tom Royal

SUMMARY

- ✓ Cheap wireless music player
- ✓ uPNP and Napster compatible
- ✗ Screen hard to read

WIRELESS NETWORK MUSIC PLAYER
Supports MP3, WAV, WMA, WMA-DRM, 802.11G interface, WEP or WPA encryption, 3.5mm socket audio output, server
REQUIRES Windows 2000/XP
SUPPLIER <http://uk.insight.com>
DETAILS www.philips.com

BELKIN TuneStage for iPod

★★★★★

£83 inc VAT

If your PC is full of music, it's easy to play it through your hi-fi using a device such as Philips' SLA5520 (above). If all your music is tucked away on an iPod, though, Belkin's TuneStage could be ideal.

The TuneStage comes in two parts. One connects to your hi-fi system via a standard set of stereo audio leads. The second plugs on to the top of your iPod. When you play

music on your iPod, it is sent wirelessly to the base unit and into your hi-fi.

The TuneStage worked well in our tests. No configuration is required, and we could move around the whole room without the signal failing.

Sadly, the TuneStage is incompatible with the latest players. But if you have an older iPod, it's a good choice.

Tom Royal



SUMMARY

- ✓ Very simple to use
- ✓ Good range
- ✗ Doesn't work with latest iPods

WIRELESS MUSIC PLAYER
3.5mm socket and stereo phono audio outputs, supports iPod 3G, iPod 4G with click wheel and iPod Mini players, uses Bluetooth
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.belkin.com

CHOOSING AN... MP3 Player

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

CAPACITY: 128MB

TECHNOLOGY: Flash memory

INTERFACE: USB

BATTERY: Disposable

SUPPORTED FORMATS: MP3, WMA

SUPPORTED FORMATS:

Recommended minimum in grey

1 Above you'll see a typical specification for an MP3 player that costs £30. Using flash memory means it can be very small and light, but its 128MB capacity provides room for just a couple of albums of MP3s encoded at 128Kbit/s. It's worth buying a player with 512MB or more to provide greater listening choice while on the move.

Cheap players often cut corners when it comes to sound quality, so approach these with caution. Flash-based players aren't sensitive to shocks or bumps, so they're ideal if you want to use them while jogging.

2 If you don't mind something bulkier, consider devices that use alternative storage technology. Hard disk-based players have up to 60GB capacity, so they can hold hundreds of albums; prices start at £150. Players based on tiny 1" hard disks of between 1.5GB and 8GB capacity cost from £100, and provide an excellent balance of portability and capacity. Hard disk players are sensitive to shocks and can be damaged if dropped, so you need to take care of them.

3 You'll need a PC to upload files to your MP3 player. A USB Hi-Speed interface will let you upload files a lot quicker than using a USB1.1 connection.

4 Battery life varies between two and 50 hours. Hard disk players are the most power-hungry and benefit from a lithium-ion battery, which is light and easy to recharge.

If you will be away from a power supply for long periods, look for a player with a replaceable battery, so you can carry spares.

5 If you want to download files from online music stores, you'll need a player that supports protected tracks. If you've got an iPod it will play only tracks purchased from the iTunes Music Store. If you've got a different player, make sure it plays protected WMA files. If a player is certified with the Plays For Sure logo it will play all protected WMA files available from the biggest music stores.

CREATIVE Zen Nano Plus 512MB

★★★★★

£53 inc VAT



Creative's competitor to Apple's iPod Shuffle is excellent value. It comes with a screen and FM radio. Battery life from AAA cells is good, but it's a shame there's no rechargeable battery. The player has few controls but we found them intuitive. It's a great-value budget player.



FLASH MP3 PLAYER 512MB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE 70PF163200023
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS <http://europe.creative.com>
✓ Great value ✗ No built-in battery
FULL REVIEW Jun 2006

IRIVER U10 1GB

★★★★★

£120 inc VAT



iRiver's U10 is the only MP3 player we've tested that's as easy to use as an iPod. It hardly has any buttons and most of its functions are controlled by rocking the screen up, down, left or right.

The U10's screen, sound quality and battery life all comfortably beat the iPod Nano, but it is expensive, particularly for a flash-based player.



FLASH MP3 PLAYER 1GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface **PART CODE** 3U104X
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.iriver.com
✓ Fantastic sound and battery ✗ Expensive
FULL REVIEW Jun 2006

SONY NW-A3000

★★★★★

£175 inc VAT



Sony's NW-A3000 looks like a bar of soap, but its design is good and it fits comfortably in the hand. Sony's firmware upgrade lets this player play WMA files, but it won't play protected files from download stores. Sony's bundled headphones are brilliant.

Unless you want to buy music online, the NW-3000's excellent battery life and sound quality make it a great choice.



HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER 20GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE NW3000V **SUPPLIER** www.dabs.com **DETAILS** www.sony.co.uk
✓ Great battery life and sound ✗ Can't play protected WMA files
FULL REVIEW Jun 2006